

Statement Of Congressman Pete Stark In Support Of The Child And Family Services Improvement Act

Monday, 24 July 2006

I rise today in support of the House amendments to the Child and Family Services Improvement Act, which include re-authorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program.

July 25, 2006

Statement Of Congressman Pete Stark

In Support Of The Child And Family Services Improvement Act

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the House amendments to the Child and Family Services Improvement Act, which include re-authorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program. I would like to thank the gentleman from California, Mr. Herger, the chairman of our Human Resources subcommittee, and the gentleman from Washington, Mr. McDermott, for their work on this important legislation.

This program does just what it says: it promotes safe and stable families. The amendments before you today guarantee \$40 million in funding to ensure that states are able to recruit, retain, and train highly qualified and skilled child welfare caseworkers. This funding is critically important. These amendments are exactly the same as HR 5640, which the Ways and Means Committee reported last month. The funding included in these amendments is crucial to making sure that foster children are provided with high level services and safe and stable placements.

A 2003 GAO report highlighted the importance of child welfare agencies being staffed with the very best caseworkers. The GAO found that when caseworkers are well trained and have manageable caseloads they are able to conduct frequent homes visits to assess a child's situation and ensure that child's safety. Skilled caseworkers are also able to make well-supported decisions that lead to permanent placements of foster children in nurturing homes. However, when caseworker turnover is high, agencies are not able to meet federal safety and permanency goals. There is a very strong correlation between caseworker recruitment and retention and safety and permanency outcomes for children.

For Example, the GAO report found:

- In Texas, due to caseworker turnover, an investigation into alleged abuse was delayed by 3 months. By the time the caseworker was able to make a home visit, the abuse could not be substantiated and the child remained in that placement. Similar occurrences took place in other states at which the GAO looked.
- Caseloads should not exceed 18 per caseworker, however the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) data showed that workers were handling an average of 24 to 31 children each
- The GAO's survey of caseworkers around the country indicated that a lack of home visits and inadequate documentation leads to permanency placement decisions being made without thorough evaluations of the adequacy and appropriateness of the placement
- The GAO reviewed the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR).

ALL of the 27 CFSRs reviewed showed that workforce deficiencies-high caseloads, training deficiencies, and staffing shortages-contributed greatly to the non-attainment of assessment measures, including timely investigation of child mistreatment and facilitation of permanent placements.

In addition, in their comments on the GAO report the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), agreed with the GAO and stated that ACF's own research showed a direct relationship between the consistency and quality of caseworker visits with the child and family and the achievement of positive case outcomes.

Unfortunately, state child welfare agencies face numerous challenges in retention and recruitment of caseworkers. Caseloads are high, salaries are low, and training is minimal. To overcome these challenges, it is vital for us to move to provide states with the means to hire and retain the very best caseworkers. The \$40 million included in these amendments will go toward solving the problem of caseworker recruitment and retention. Although \$40 million is not nearly enough to fully address the problem, it is vital that we at least provide that much. The money will go toward ensuring that foster children are visited at least monthly by a caseworker. If states are able to accomplish this goal they will then be able to access additional money to improve caseworker retention, recruitment and training. The money can only be used for that purpose.

We have over 800,000 children who spend time in foster care each year. This body has an obligation to make sure that these children are in safe and stable environments. I urge you to support the House Amendments and the opportunity they provide to improve the lives of tens of thousands of children.